

behind the news

Mobile theft is up, and with the rise in handheld computing it's only likely to get worse. But robbery is the least of your worries if you're prone to throwing your handset down the loo... Gillian Law figures out the world of phone fumbles

Mobile phone manufacturers are definitely having the last laugh, as they continually churn out more and more replacement handsets for us, the clumsy public. Not only do unfortunate individuals regularly leave their mobile phones in the pub or have them stolen – an estimated 1.3 million went Awol last year – but they also throw them into drinks, drop them down the lavatory and stick them in the washing machine (presumably after the toilet incidents).

Phone numbers

A report released in February by Continental Research says four percent of people in the UK have had their mobile phones stolen in the past year. Another 2.9 million users broke their devices in unspecified circumstances, 1.6 million just plain lost them, 600,000 dropped them down toilets, 400,000 somehow got them into their drinks and another 200,000 accidentally sent them for a spin in a washing machine.

Oh, and the police were presumably too distracted to catch all the thieves owing to the 1.3 million people who

Londoners were the worst hit in terms of mobile phone theft, with capital city dwellers being twice as likely to have their phones stolen than folks living anywhere else in the UK

dialled 999 on their handsets by mistake; some keypad locks still don't prevent contact with the emergency services.

This 'high level of enforced churn' (churn is how fast a company gains and loses customers) will make sure the market for replacement mobile phones stays extremely "buoyant", Continental Research said, which basically means 'rub your hands boys, you're minted'.



London calling

Your geographical location seems to make a difference to whether you'll be a victim of mobile phone theft, too. Continental Research discovered that Londoners were the worst hit in terms of mobile phone theft, with capital city dwellers being twice as likely to have their phones stolen than folks living anywhere else in the UK. However this could be due in part to Londoners using their phones much more regularly in public places, unwittingly attracting the attention of undesirable characters.

And while phoning in the street might be fashionable behaviour down south, it's a trend that's yet to catch on elsewhere. After a year living in London, I got some strange looks back home in Edinburgh when chatting into my mobile in the shopping centre.

Because we're worth it

Our reasons for investing in a brand-spanking-new mobile phone were also investigated by Continental Research. New models aren't bought solely because users have mislaid or damaged their old phones: Britons have a thing for new toys, with 28 percent of users planning to upgrade in the next year just because they want a phone to play with. The research also showed that young people and those on contracts – as opposed to pay-as-you-go customers – are more keen on experimenting with new mobiles.

So what are people doing with these phones, other than throwing them about carelessly? Many of us are using them as alarm clocks, calculators and calendars as well as calling our friends. And we use them more than ever, with 10 percent of people make all of their calls on their mobile and not using landlines at all. The younger the user, the more they spend.

All this makes it a healthy market for the manufacturers. Just wait until 3G (third generation) services take off and people start reading their handheld PCs in the bathroom instead of the morning paper. Shares in Nokia, anyone? ■